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'Lalu is the biggest hero of social empowerment in Bihar': Srikant



By Abhay Kumar, Special to The Milli Gazette

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Director of Jagjivan Ram Institute of Parliamentary Studies and Political Research (Patna), Srikant is a noted author, journalist and activist. His books, dealing with social and political dynamics of Bihar, continue to guide both policymakers and researchers. Amid the din of electoral campaign in Bihar, **Abhay Kumar** sat with this sixty-one year scholar at his Patna residence to understand complexities of the Bihar polls. Following are excerpts from this interview which was conducted before the counting of the polls:

What are your views about Bihar polls?

After the first and second phase of elections, people started saying that Backwards (*pichharen*) have been consolidated. If it is true then Mahagathabandhan [JD (U), RJD and Congress-led Grand Alliance] would have a lead. Broadly speaking, the backward community is largely supporting Nitish and Lalu.



Srikant

What is the role of caste in determining political behaviour?

Caste (*jati*) is never static in society. Instead, it has always been dynamic (*gatishil*). In every election, a new equation emerges. For example, in the first and second phases of these elections, the consolidation of Backwards has been in favour of the Mahagathbandhan. But to get the full picture we will have to wait.

With big Dalit leaders like Paswan and Manjhi on its side, the BJP hoped to get overwhelming support of Dalits but Dalits seem to be divided over their choice. What is your take?

Like the BJP, every party tries to win the support of a particular caste. As for Dalits, there are 23 sub-castes in Bihar. At one time, Dalits and Muslims were supporters of the Congress party. But in 1977, some castes left the Congress and after the 1990s, a new consolidation emerged. Some people are saying that Paswans are with the BJP. But there are many misconceptions and simple generalisations about the political behaviour of castes in Bihar. Nitish has created the category of Dalits and Mahadalits and even made a Musahar [Jitan Ram Manjhi] the chief minister for nine months. Given that Manjhi has gone to BJP, will all Manjhis in the state vote for the BJP? For example, Dalits in Bhoupur areas would vote for CPI-ML (Liberation). Without any sweeping generalisation, I would say that voting patterns will also be determined by local and regional configurations and factors. Similarly, not all Kushwahas would vote for the BJP since Upendra Kushwaha is with the BJP. That is why one should avoid resorting to simple generalisation.

The BJP has given tickets to Yadavs. Has it been able to get Yadav voters?

In Patna city, Yadavs do vote for BJP leader Nand Kishore Yadav. It is true that the BJP has given some tickets to Yadavs but we should not forget that every party has an identity. Nobody will say that the BJP is a party of backwards. Rather it is a Brahminical party. Sometime back the upper castes switched their support from the Congress to the BJP. Similarly, the identity of Nitish and Lau is that of Backwards.

What do you have to say about the alliance between Nitish and Lalu?

Lalu is the biggest hero (*nayak*) of social empowerment in Bihar. Karpoori Thakur came from a backward caste but he was the leader of all sections but Lalu projected himself as the leader of Backwards. Moreover, Lalu has worked for bridging the gap in society so much so that it compelled the BJP had to toss the name of an EBC like Prem Kumar as would-be CM of Bihar. Many people try to judge Lalu on the scale of development but such an exercise is futile. Unlike Lalu, Nitish has brought to the centre-stage the concept of development. Lalu accepted Nitish as the chief ministerial candidate of the Mahagathbandhan. Both Nitish and Lalu are working in a close cooperation. They know that, unlike the BJP, they do not have many leaders and much resources.

What do you have to say about the aggressive mode of campaign by the BJP, particularly its attack on Lalu?

The BJP kicked off its electoral campaign in an aggressive manner. Mohan Bhagwat, Modi and Amit Shah raised the issues of reservations, beef and jungle raj. Calling Lalu's rule as a jungle raj is informed by one's social location in favour of feudal forces. For example, those who are opposed to backwards would call it [Lalu raj] a jungle raj.

Where did the BJP make a mistake?

The BJP has become aggressive (*akarmak*) and began to attack Lalu. The BJP would have done much better had the party talked about its own agenda than launching a personal tirade against Lalu.

Some Muslims argue that even the Mahagathbandhan has not addressed the issues of Muslims so far while they have been largely supporting the forces of social justice in Bihar?

It is possible that Muslims might have had some grievances but they do not have many options available today. **Both Dalits and Muslims are at the bottom of society and there is a need to rethink about their development.**

Abhay Kumar is pursuing PhD at Centre for Historical Studies, JawaharlalNehruUniversity, New Delhi. He covered Biharelections for The Milli Gazette. He may be contacted at [debatingissues\(a\)gmail\(.\)com](mailto:debatingissues(a)gmail(.)com)

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